

THE CHILD SOLDIER EXPERIENCE IN UZODINMA IWEALA'S

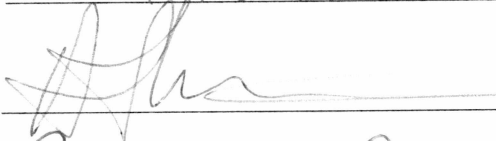
BEASTS OF NO NATION

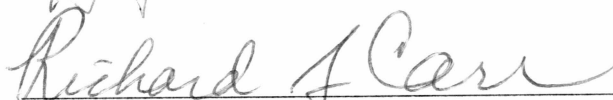
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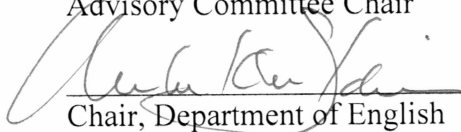
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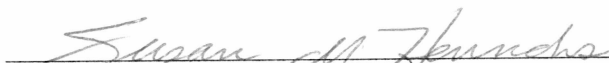


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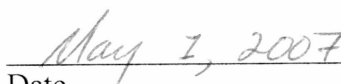
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THE CHILD SOLDIER EXPERIENCE IN UZODINMA IWEALA'S

BEASTS OF NO NATION

A

THESIS

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of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

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By

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ABSTRACT

Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* plays an integral role in raising awareness of the child soldier epidemic. It portrays this global issue through the eyes of Agu, the child narrator. This thesis attempts to understand the extent to which Agu's experiences with the rebel group as well as his participation in war affect him. Agu struggles to maintain his identity during his exposure to and forced involvement in rape, thievery, and murder. His age leaves him particularly vulnerable to the ravages of war, and although Agu succeeds in maintaining some of his identity, he is eventually alienated from himself and others. Nevertheless, Agu's enthusiasm and resilience show him capable of reintegration, despite the rehabilitation center's inadequacies. He faces the challenges of rejoining normal society, overcoming his guilt, and reclaiming his identity, but his healing is restricted through the center's emphasis on Western methods of healing. Other rebels like Luftenant, Griot, and Rambo are also victimized. Their ruthless barbarity partially results from their sense of powerlessness in a chaotic world. Yet their humanity appears in small demonstrations of restraint and helplessness, thus indicating the hope for all child soldiers' capacity for rehabilitation.

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INTRODUCTION

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (United Nations). While people today generally think children function in war as civilian victims, the need to define a child has arisen from the gross exploitation of children in combat. P.W. Singer, author of *Children At War*, writes that child combatants are a current phenomenon and that although child enlistment existed as far back as the Spartans, most children did not see fighting. He observes that their jobs consisted of carrying armor, playing drums, and serving as pages (10-13). Literary representations of children in warfare, however, show children in combat as not simply a current phenomenon. The Biblical David and Goliath and Homer’s Patroclus in *The Iliad* demonstrate historical use of child combatants. In more recent literary history, Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* also shows children in war. Today, increasing numbers of boys and girls are participating in both small and large scale conflicts, as seen in Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1994), Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* (2002), Amadou Kourouma’s *Allah is not Obligated* (2000), and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005). The term “child soldier” has emerged to describe such victimization, and I will focus on *Beasts* in an attempt to understand the extent to which children are affected by war by exploring the psychologies of several characters, most importantly, Agu’s, the protagonist. First, I will identify the current state of child soldiers.

The difference between the child combatants of the past and contemporary ones is that today children are abducted or pressed into service against their will and forced to commit unthinkable atrocities against innocent people by groups that have no motive but to rape, murder, and pillage. Soldiers like Patroclus and David play integral roles in demonstrating heroism on the battlefield; David liberates an entire nation and Patroclus' death is the sole reason why Achilles fights, bringing glory to the Greeks. Even *Red Badge's* Henry arguably gains a sense of security in himself and grows into a man. The child soldiers today, however, only experience brutality and degradation.

The number of child soldiers at any given time, according to Michael Wessells, an expert who has published several texts on child soldiers, is estimated to be 300,000; the exact figure, however, is unknown (2). This number ranges from children recruited for government armies, such as in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, to children abducted in the middle of the night by rebel groups like the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda. Moreover, child soldiers serve or have served in thirty seven of the fifty-five current or recently ended conflicts (Singer 29). And although child soldiers exist worldwide, of the forty-two countries known to exploit children in combat from 1998 to 2003, fifteen were in Africa (17). Many of these nations continue to have conflicts involving child soldiers.

One of the most perverse examples of the use of child soldiers is the LRA, a unit consisting almost entirely of children (20); its leader, Joseph Kony, denies their existence (*Soldier Child*). Kony claims to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. He

names his objective as overthrowing Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni and his government in order to rule Uganda with the Ten Commandments. He gains members for his army by abducting them from villages and towns in Northern Uganda and keeps his camp in the Sudanese bush (Human Rights Watch 2) because the Sudanese government protects the LRA and supplies it with food and ammunitions. One estimate claims that Kony and his men have abducted more than fourteen thousand children (Singer 20) in the past two decades (Wessells 13).

Kony uses both boys and girls as soldiers, but girls are usually given to superior officers as “wives.” Kony himself has sixty-seven wives (Singer 100). Ugandans’ intense fear of Kony and his men have forced children from villages all over to walk every evening for sometimes five miles to sleep in locked up areas, and then walk back to their villages every morning. They are called “night commuters” and tens of thousands of children make this trek (“Children of War”). Although Kony has been terrorizing Uganda for over twenty years, the International Criminal Court (ICC) did not issue an arrest warrant until July 8, 2005 (“Warrant of Arrest”). But Kony has yet to be captured; he says that if the ICC recalls its arrest warrant, he will no longer fight. The ICC of course refuses to do so since Kony cannot be trusted. This refusal has caused problems among Ugandans, who see the ICC’s refusal as an obstruction of possible peace (*Soldier Child*).

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is also experiencing an epidemic of child soldiers. In 1996, Laurent Kabila led a revolt against what was then Zaire and called his army the Alliance of Democratic Forces for Liberation (Wessells 12). After

Kabila killed nearly tens of thousands of civilians, Dictator Motubu Sese Seko fled the area and Kabila became president until he was assassinated in 2001; the government army continued to use child soldiers until 2003. During his revolution, Kabila's army consisted of children from as many as eight different countries; there are currently between 30,000 and 50,000 child soldiers in the DRC (Singer 21) and Wessells calls the conflict in the DRC the "deadliest current conflict" (12). Although the country's military has stopped using child soldiers, groups supporting the government continue to exploit children. Other groups in the DRC such as the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC), the Congolese Rally for Democracy—Liberation Movement (RCD-ML), and the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) have also recruited child soldiers and continue to fight against the government (12). While some children "voluntarily" join various rebel or military groups, many are abducted, even from refugee camps, favorite places for rebels for their concentration of vulnerable, displaced children (38).

Child soldiers have generally received little media attention, and although the first global study of child soldiers took place in 1996 (9), only in the past three years has scholarship addressing the problem become available; child soldiers had not received any national media attention until the latter part of 2005. This lack of attention relegates the responsibility of educating people to written narratives. In 2004, China Keitetsi, a former child soldier in Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA—now known as the Uganda People's Democratic Front (UPDF)), published her relatively unknown autobiography. Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a*

Boy Soldier came out this year. His book recounts life as a boy soldier during Sierra Leone's civil war and is promised consumer success through Beah's recent guest appearances on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* as well as NPR. Beah's memoir has given child soldiers more time in the media spotlight, but America still remains ignorant and inattentive towards the problem. To complement Beah's and Keitetsi's autobiographies are fictional representations. The political agenda of news shows causes skepticism among viewers regarding the credibility of the news, thus elevating literary representations of child to the position of creating awareness of the epidemic.

Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* is the earliest novel depicting a contemporary child soldier. Mene, the protagonist, lives in Dukana, Nigeria. He hopes to obtain his driver's license and become a taxi driver, but meets Agnes, a girl he refers to as "JJC" (Johnny Just Come), a beauty. Agnes refuses to give him any attention until he proves his manhood by joining the army; she later marries him with this condition. Mene looks forward to his service, as he has heard of the prestige associated with soldierhood from veterans of World War II. Mene's naïve concept of warfare sets him up for severe disappointment in the lack of glory in war.

One of the first lessons Mene learns from military service is that his leaders are corrupt. His commanding officer withholds provisions from his men and then punishes them by ironically denying them food and water, Mene included, when they find out. Soon after, his "san mazor" (sergeant major) avenges them by killing their Commandant. Mene is later fired at during an air raid and awakens to find himself a captive of the opposing forces. He agrees to become their driver, which later allows

him to escape the army. When Mene reaches his hometown, he finds it destroyed. The remaining villagers believe he is an evil spirit come to haunt Dukana and force Mene to leave.

Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog*, translated from French in 2005, is told from the perspectives of both the sixteen year-old title character, a detestable child soldier for whom the reader has no sympathy, and Laokole, a village girl in charge of her brother and crippled mother who must flee General Giap's rebel group, of which Mad Dog is a part. The novel takes place in and around Kandahar, Democratic Republic of Congo. The official government has been overthrown and General Giap authorizes his soldiers to loot the city as their reward. The two narratives—Laokole's flight from the rebels and Mad Dog's perception of the war—often depict the same situations and environments in extremely different ways. Mad Dog's point of view is highly unreliable, as his pleasure in his soldierhood distorts his perception of reality, but his perspective allows us to understand how he sees himself and the rebel group.

Mad Dog is also an indictment against the Western world's slow effort or unwillingness to give aid to developing countries in conflict. Laokole finds refuge in a foreign embassy and stays there until the foreign powers evacuate their own people, leaving the Congolese to run from Mad Dog's men. Dongala also illustrates how Western media romanticizes war as sensationally tragic through Katelijne, a Belgian journalist. After Laokole reaches a refugee camp, she and Mad Dog eventually come face to face when Laokole protects a little girl from being beaten to death by the rebel.

Mad Dog later tries to avenge himself of Laokole's denying him the right to beat the girl, but Laokole kills him in a symbolically loaded stomping of his genitals.

Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* was translated, also from French, in 2006. Readers follow Birahima, a self-described "street kid" (5) from the Ivory Coast. When his mother dies of an ulcer, Birahima goes in search of his aunt in Liberia with the help of Yacouba, a *grigriman*, or shaman. They are overtaken by Papa Le Bon, a warlord who capitalizes on his role as a father figure to his child soldiers. The ten year-old boy tells "wonderful things" (37) about being a soldier in Le Bon's army, as it provides him with food, respect, and power. Unlike the other novels, mysticism plays an integral role in the war. Le Bon's army relies heavily on the charms that Yacouba makes to protect the rebels in battle; spirituality is so essential to victory that Le Bon keeps Yacouba on his payroll.

Birahima later serves under various warlords and tells in a very matter of fact way the brutality he sees and participates in. Birahima wants everyone to read his story, and uses various dictionaries of French, English, and "Black Nigger African Native" (44) to explain fully his situation. He narrates with both bravado and frankness, vacillating between telling the reader his actual feelings and hiding behind his toughness.

Iweala's *Beasts* opens with young Agu having been discovered hiding from the rebel group that he is soon forced to join, and is narrated by this child in a form of pidgin English. Agu is at first excited about his soldierhood, as he remembers seeing "men walking with brand-new uniform and shiny sword holding gun and shouting left

right, left right, behind trumpet and drum” (11), but quickly learns that a child soldier’s life is, at its minimum, horrific, traumatizing, and barbaric. His first task as a soldier, after training, is to kill someone, an experience described to him as “like falling in love” (12). Agu disconnects from his induction into the group, describing his actions without disclosing his feelings towards the killing. He only reveals and extensively narrates two instances where he must kill (one while on drugs), but the effects of killing, raping, and looting appear throughout the entire novel in his expressions of self-loathing.

Interspersed with Agu’s retelling of rebel experiences are occasional flashbacks of his life before the war. He recalls attending school, his mother reading to him, and the events leading up to the separation from his family and introduction to the rebels. These flashbacks occur mostly in the first half of the novel and become more distorted as the book progresses. His flashback of a lesson in school, for instance, turns into a scene in which a past victim revisits and threatens Agu with machetes. Agu’s flashbacks become less frequent as a result of his deteriorating psychological state, as well as because the absence of food, shelter, and clothing are so overwhelming that Agu devotes all of his mental energy to survival.

The characters with whom the protagonist has the most significant relationships are Commandant, the leader, and Strika, another child soldier. Strika does not speak, but befriends Agu and helps him handle the harrowing life of soldierhood. Commandant acts as a father figure for Agu, encouraging him when necessary, but he is anything but gentle. He occasionally offers Agu privileges, such

as sitting in the truck rather than standing in the bed while traveling, but these favors chiefly result from his rape of Agu. Fortunately, he and the rest of the group escape when Rambo, the new second in command soldier, shoots and kills Commandant.

The last section of the novel follows Agu's physically and psychologically exhausting trek away from the war and leaves him inhabiting a rehabilitation center. Although he no longer serves the rebels, Agu faces the daunting challenge of reentering society and resists the help of Amy, an American psychotherapist. Agu's future is not completely hopeless, however, as the last line of the novel shows Agu remembering his family and its love for him, thus indicating the possibility of Agu's recovery and reintegration.

Beasts differs from the rest of the child soldier novels by depicting the process of turning a child into a child soldier. We see him before his forced enlistment; we see how he becomes a rebel. We follow his experience as a soldier until his eventual residence at a rehabilitation center. *Beasts* also allows a closeness to its narrator absent in the other texts, which serves my interest in Agu's changing psychology. The other three novels are also narrated in first person, but the characters' concerns for bravado in *Johnny Mad Dog* and *Allah* create distance between them and the reader; Mene's naiveté in *Sozaboy* allows comparable proximity to the narrator, but his experience of war differs greatly from that of many twenty-first century child soldiers. Mene's enlistment is neither forced by the government nor is it for socio-economic reasons, both of which are currently rapidly growing problems.

Additionally, *Beasts* does not perpetuate the view of child soldiers as bloodthirsty animals, a danger against which nearly all child soldier experts caution. Demonizing these children hardens people towards the epidemic, making it difficult to remember that even Johnny Mad Dog is a victim. Agu's gentleness also prevents the narrative from becoming trivialized, whereas Dongala's character may be interpreted as a sensationalized murderer rather than a tragic figure.

This novel is remarkable in its ability to present Agu as a consistently sympathetic character despite the atrocities he commits, part of which is accomplished through the depiction of the entire transformation from child to child soldier. Iweala writes in "Writing *Beasts of No Nation*," located at the back of the paperback version of *Beasts*, "I wrote and write about violence because of a desire to understand my own and other people's humanness." Implied in this statement is a desire to understand how war changes children, specifically child participants in war. My thesis attempts to function in a similar way by emphasizing the ways in which Agu is vulnerable in my first chapter. Agu's need to see himself as a part of a community influences heavily his interaction with Commandant and the other rebels, and ultimately makes him more pliable to the demands of soldierhood. My second chapter identifies possible reasons why other rebels participate in Commandant's group as well as areas where the characters demonstrate their humanity. This capacity for human feeling and relationships evident in various characters serves to emphasize the fact that child soldiers are not simply monsters for whom there is no hope. Their actions are largely motivated by the need to survive, a motivation obvious in Agu's actions. My third

chapter elaborates on child soldiers' humanity by underscoring Agu's potential for rehabilitation and reintegration into a normal community despite the rehabilitation center's inadequacies. Agu's state at the end of the novel leaves readers feeling hopeful that children like him can live normal lives and can reclaim their identity.

AGU'S IDENTITY STRUGGLES

James Garbarino and Kathleen Kostelny, who have worked extensively with children in war-torn and violent areas in the world, write in "What Do We Need to Know to Understand Children in War and Community Violence?" that "children are not simply adults. There is human kinship that unites children and adults, but there are significant cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and physical differences that separate us. Adults who seek to understand children in war must recognize these differences" (34). The psychological repercussions of war, then, are more pronounced in children than they are in adults. Iweala claims to have imagined Agu as a nine year-old boy (Page 27), but Agu's age in the novel remains ambiguous. His underdeveloped sense of the world, however, is evident. The differences Gabarino and Kostelny identify between adults and children partially result from Agu's limited perception of his world. And because Agu's identity formation relies on his view of his society, his concept of himself is also underdeveloped (Masten and Shaffer 13).

Agu's conflict throughout the novel centers on determining how to maintain his identity while simultaneously fitting into the groups of people around him and managing the traumatic effects his always changing circumstances have on him. The sense of belonging Agu gains from his community helps him define himself, so if he is removed from his community, he cannot know who he is because no clearly defined role or place exists for him. When that community shifts from his family and village to Commandant and his men, however, Agu must negotiate finding meaning in a soldier's life and retaining the selfhood he already has. Yet in his efforts to identify

with the rebels, Agu loses the childlike aspects of himself necessary for him to function normally. Specifically, Agu's "forced choice" (Cole) costs him his sense of security, his self-worth, and his morality, resulting in feelings of both social and self alienation.

Although Agu's struggles with his sense of self are most severe during his time with the rebels, his identity distortion begins when he is still with his family. Of primary concern in any child's development is his ability to feel safe. This safety enables Agu to define and express himself in an environment that encourages him to do so. Establishing such an environment requires meeting Agu's emotional, mental, and basic needs. His parents nurture and support their son before the war, but when the conflict gets uncomfortably close, Agu's parents become what Garabino and Kostelny call "psychologically unavailable" (36), and address Agu's needs second to their own. Agu's father, for instance, tells his wife that she and their daughter will flee their village while he and Agu stay behind. He explains, "How can Agu be coming with you if we are supposed to be the men of this village? What is that looking like if everybody is staying to make sure their house is all right and we are just running from place to place? Enh? That is not right" (67). Agu's mother responds, "YOUR SON THIS AND THAT! Sometimes I am thinking that you are having no sense at all. Let me just be taking him with me enh. If there is war and everybody is dying, then who is even going to say anything if he is not staying around" (68). The father's failure to reply to his wife signifies his awareness of his own stubbornness and willingness to sacrifice his son for the sake of his ego.

Agu's father suffers from *philotimia*, a Greek term for the love of being seen as honorable in the eyes of others; he insists on keeping Agu with him because he is more preoccupied with his own image than with his son's safety. The shame of being unable to provide for his family in the way a man is expected to drives Agu's father to seek the villagers' approval of his decision in order to feel validated. Agu at one point describes him as "looking like goat that is ready to die" (62), illustrating the extent of his father's broken spirit. Agu's father regains control over his family and asserts the patriarchal right he has to determine his family's future by keeping Agu with him. In essence, Agu's father wants to be master of his home and family again. Agu's mother is also implicated in endangering her son's safety, as she undoubtedly knows what will happen if Agu stays, but succumbs to cultural expectation by deferring to male authority (Kilbride 97).

When Agu overhears his parents fighting, he takes it upon himself to resolve their problem because he believes that he can soothe his father's ego; consequently, he forces himself to take on an adult role and bear the overwhelming burden of determining his father's fate. William Damon maintains that roles and responsibilities in family must be distributed and that members of that family need to cooperate and accept their positions (52). Agu's position has been disrupted, so he worries about the psychological neuroses of others rather than normal childhood concerns. Ann S. Masten and Anne Shaffer, scholars on family dynamics, observe that a child's development depends highly on the "functional competence" of his parents, who, if such competence is compromised, may not see "impending danger" and place their

child at risk (13); Agu's parents are such people. Agu is entitled to expecting that his parents will do everything in their power to put his needs first and keep him safe, part of which means remaining within the culturally prescribed role of a child within a family. Philip Leroy and Janet Capriotti Kilbride, in their book on East African families, assert that familial expectations for children are generally restricted to household responsibilities and obedience (89). Any deviation from this role and those corresponding to their parents can create unhealthy instability for children; his parents' deviation specifically causes Agu to lose his rightful sense of security.

Agu unknowingly articulates the magnitude of his insecurity through his observations of a lizard seeking shelter from the rain:

My belly was starting to tight too much because I am lying and thinking that I am not wanting to be seeing all the killing, but I am also knowing that I cannot just be leaving my father alone here and running off otherwise all of the other men will be laughing at him. So I am just staring at the roof and listening to the rainwater going PAH PAH PAH on the roof and to the lizard that is trying to find place to hide from the heavy rain, but I am not sleeping because I am fearing too too much.

(68)

Agu, like the lizard, must manage the burden of his situation regardless of his intense fear; his disrupted position in his family and dread of his adult responsibility appear through the lizard's failure to find safe shelter. Equally important is the forcefulness of the rain over his head; the PAH PAH PAH magnifies Agu's overwhelming insecurity;

he is acutely aware that only he can restore his father's honor. Although his father has suffered greatly from the changes the war has brought, he is an adult and can therefore confront his despair and loss of authority much more effectively than Agu can in assuming that authority.

A comparable familial situation occurs in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigeneia to the gods for "the proud men of Greece / and their bronze battle-gear" (1690-91), but he follows through with making the arrangements for fear of being seen as a lesser leader among the soldiers, similar to Agu's father's preoccupation with the villagers' approval. Both fathers also change their mind (although Agamemnon later adheres to his original decision), but their children still believe that the sacrifice must take place to maintain their father's security as leaders. This belief creates a reversal of roles, with the child as the authority and the parent as the obedient follower, because their parents refuse to take an active role in protecting their offspring. Agu's perception of his ability to restore his father's dignity, however, does not make him an adult nor does he restore his father's status; yet he still does not function within the confines of childhood. There is no indication that any other decision would have prevented Agu from becoming a child soldier, but if Agu and his dad had left with his mother and sister, the family could have met their fate together and Agu's parents would maintain their responsibility as protectors. Both parents abandon that role, though, and thus abandon their son.

Additionally, Agu's familial displacement extends beyond his immediate family. The Kilbrides state that children are desired in families, in part, because they are the conduits through which past traditions and values are carried into the future. Children are raised with the hopes of becoming productive members of society connected to both past traditions and future possibilities:

This objective, a universal instrumental one, is achieved by their symbolic elaboration of the social dimension. The collectivity: family, clan, lineage, or ethnic group, takes precedence over the individual. The ideal typical *person* is one who is firmly rooted in the group with a commensurate orientation for social responsibilities. The parent, therefore, literally has children *for* the social group. Children are raised as social persons who will be properly oriented to the group, its ancestors, and the needs of their own parents. (85)

Although the Kilbrides' focus is East Africa and Iweala notes the setting for *Beasts* in an unidentified West African country in the supplemental material in the paperback version of the novel, the Kilbrides' emphasis on the collective identity and children as the bearers of the past surfaces through Agu's flashbacks. His family consists not simply of people existing at the same time, but includes ancestors, the community, present and future, and any children. Family, then, is an abstract construct rather than clearly defined.

All of the aforementioned aspects of family contribute to Agu's sense of identity and self. Agu's father's decision to keep his son with him prevents Agu from

connecting with his group and even alienates Agu from his ancestors. The result is a complete disconnection from any familiar community of which Agu can be a part, and since his identity depends upon the group and his contribution to it, Agu becomes a sort of nonexistent entity without that connection. His parents have denied him a belonging to a group, thus ostracizing him. The image of Agu running away from the war symbolizes his lack of a place in society because he is separated from the group and no longer depending on adults as a child would. Agu revisits this memory and recalls seeing "bullet making my father to dance everywhere with his arm raising high to the sky like he is praising god" (11) when Commandant's men find him, identifying his parents as the cause of his situation.

Agu's fractured sense of familial belonging intensifies his desire to identify with a group when he is forced to join the rebels. While he wants to reclaim his relationship with a family unit and have a valued and secure position in it, he struggles with the rebels' appalling value system that he will need to adopt. Before Agu can attempt any sort of identification with the rebels, though, he has to face his separation from his parents and sister. His efforts to do so are exemplified when he finds the hiding mother and daughter in the raided village. Agu drags them out from under their bed and demands, "Are you my mother?...Are you my sister?" (48). Agu asks these questions to reinforce the difference between himself and his victims, thus making killing easier and lessening his crime against his victims. But Agu's displacement has disoriented him so much that he is genuinely asking who his family is; Agu knows that he has family, but he has partly forgotten what it means to be a part of one since

he has been separated from what he knows, partially resocialized, and forced to kill. He longs for the comfort, security, and stability inherent in a normal family; the “gun juice” (43) and the disconnection from reality it provides enable Agu to express his feelings of extreme displacement. Before he kills the mother and her daughter, Agu relates that he sometimes cuts babies out of their mothers’ wombs “to be seeing who is girl and who is boy” (48). The unborn children and their mothers represent the bond among family members and the inherent investment in the others’ well-being that Agu wants for himself. He subconsciously envies the babies’ complete identification with their mothers, as they are literally extensions of their mothers’ bodies, and deprives them of that which he is deprived by Commandant; the gruesomeness with which Agu expresses himself reveals the magnitude of his sense of loss.

The absence of a family means that no one loves or cares about Agu, that nothing he does matters, and that he is essentially alone in the world and therefore nonexistent past his role as a soldier. His dialogue with the woman from the raided village illustrates his fear of a soldier identity. As Strika prepares to rape the woman, Agu holds down one of her legs while she screams at him, “DEVIL BLESS YOU! DEVIL BORN YOU!” (48). He replies, “[I]t is not Devil that is borning me. I am having father and mother and I am coming from them” (48). Agu’s retaliation has less to do with evil than it does with avoiding a comparison with the ultimate example of the forsaken child. Although he uses drugs to stifle self-reflection and encourage violent behavior, Agu still thinks about belonging to a family.

The only value placed on Agu's existence in the rebel group is one of utility, which is why Agu and the other soldiers take gun juice. Agu does not specify what gun juice consists of, but typical drugs used by child soldiers and rebel groups include mixtures of cocaine, barbiturates, and amphetamines (Singer 81). Once the gun juice takes effect, Agu feels "in my body something like electricity and I am starting to think: Yes it is good to fight. I am liking how the gun is shooting and the knife is chopping. I am liking to see people running from me and people screaming for me when I am killing them and taking their blood. I am liking to kill" (45). Iweala's depiction of rebel reliance on mind-altering drugs and their effects on soldiers is quite accurate. Many guerilla organizations encourage, if not require, that their soldiers take some drug while fighting (Wessells 76). One child soldier from Sierra Leone relates that drug use was so important to combat performance that "when you refuse to take drugs, it's called technical sabotage and you are killed" (qtd. in Sesay 152). Furthermore, a director of a child soldier repatriation camp remarks that children "would do just about anything that was ordered" on drugs (qtd. in Singer 82), and in a fearless and uncontrollably violent manner (Wessells 77). The ideal killer, then, essentially lives to kill and takes sufficient pleasure in it to do so willingly. If a soldier cannot do this, he is worthless. Agu has not been with the rebels very long, but he has already learned that "if you are losing this gun or knife, then Commandant will be losing you" (90), and his self worth suffers as a result of his realization.

Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* echoes rebels' determining a child soldier's worth as measured by his killing capabilities. Birahima comments that Papa le Bon

does not smoke hash because it “was reserved for the child-soldier, on account of it made them as strong as real soldiers” (71). When Papa le Bon is killed and Birahima must join another rebel group, he wants to be a member of the “elite” squadron of especially brutal child soldiers, but cannot; the initiation requires that Birahima kill one of his own parents, but both of them are dead. He laments what he sees as a loss of opportunity and remarks, “I was useless, a nobody” (175). Birahima obviously differs from Agu in his satisfaction with being a child soldier, but both narrators know their worthlessness to their superiors if they do not kill.

A character more similar to Agu is Mene of Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*, who has been told that war is like “children playing” (34). Mene’s naiveté regarding war does not prepare him for seasoned fighter Manmuswak’s definition of a soldier: “You can be anything when there is war. [Manmuswak] say that he can carry gun and dead body...And he is really soza...He can fight and kill his brother, he does not care. He can be friend today and enemy tomorrow. He does not care. Once it is war” (120). Manmuswak’s explanation of a soldier’s job proves true for Agu, as his feeling for his victims and the rebel’s actions do not matter.

If Agu does not kill, he cannot be a part of the rebel group. Before Commandant’s men take gun juice and attack a village, one child soldier refuses to fight and is killed; Commandant orders the other soldiers, Agu included, to “jump on [the boy’s] chest, so we are jumping on his chest until it is only blood that is coming out of his mouth” (42). Agu then kills the daughter from the raided village in the same way, with Commandant watching. Few details are given regarding the circumstances

of the boy who refuses to fight for Commandant. We do know, however, that many child soldiers who refuse to fight do so knowing they will be killed (HRW 2). The boy most likely wanted to stop fighting so badly that the consequences of his decision did not matter. His refusal is a symbolic rejection of the corrupted family that is the rebel group and affirmation of his identity before his soldierhood, making the boy a martyr. Agu's imitation of this child soldier's murder demonstrates his allegiance to Commandant and abandonment of his own family.

Child soldiers are killed in such brutal ways because rebel leaders want to ensure that all soldiers know the consequences of rebelling (HRW 18-19). Agu's recollection of the boy's murder and imitation of it show that he has received Commandant's message and approves of it; there is even a brief moment when Agu, in his drug induced state, adopts the rebel's ideology of villagers as enemies and conceives of the mother he kills as responsible for "killing my family and burning my house and stealing my food and making my family to scatter" (50). Commandant's approval of the murder matters to Agu not only because Commandant is his military superior, but also because Agu needs a father figure and Commandant satisfies that need. Commandant provides Agu with food and water when it is available, and occasionally treats him with kindness; Agu also admires Commandant's masculine appearance and commanding presence. He, unlike Agu's real father, makes decisions, acts on them, and survives.

In short, Commandant provides Agu with a distorted but strong version of a role model. D. Holland and his three co-authors of *Identity and Agency in Cultural*

Worlds maintain that children determine who they are by watching role models and then acting in accord with what they notice about those role models (qtd. in Wessells 82). Agu's respect for patriarchal authority makes him no exception; he takes great care to respect his father's privacy and never disturbs his father when he is working, thus conforming to what his father expects. His desire to please the authority figure appears in his relations with Commandant as well. Commandant becomes the head of a perverted family to the children forced to serve under him, and his gentle, albeit threatening, behavior towards Agu communicates his "sanction" (Damon 51) of Agu's purpose in his group, providing the boy with a sense of worth. Yet this distorted version of a family and his ability to find a place in it do not sustain Agu. The crimes he must constantly commit in order to prove himself prevent Agu from retaining his self worth when he is not on gun juice. In fact, the degraded and bestial nature of Agu's self-perception becomes more pronounced as the novel progresses, causing Agu to refer to himself as an "animal in the night" (81) and fear that he is "dying and becoming spirit" (102).

While Agu's insecurity and depreciated self worth weigh heavily on his mind, the guilt for his action is the paramount factor in Agu's mental stability. He knows that he cannot be held accountable for his actions because they are forced upon him; he nevertheless struggles with the effect those acts have on his spiritual well-being. Typical morality concerns for children around Agu's age are whether or not they should share their toys or cheat on a test (Damon 3), but Agu has to battle with seeing himself as morally depraved, or a "bad boy" (23). The contrast between what Agu

should worry about and what he actually worries about exemplifies Agu's unpreparedness for such mental stress. In an attempt to maintain his sense of morality, Agu rationalizes his crimes as socially acceptable.

At first Agu believes his training has made him "ready" to kill (15); this training has involved physical preparation, but it is unclear whether or not any ideological indoctrination has occurred. Commandant does, however, use Agu's father's murder to encourage Agu to view killing as necessary and permissible. Research on children soldiers' concept of morality focuses mainly on children's underdeveloped understanding of death, and so the brutality with which they attack reflects their arrested understanding of their actions (Singer 80). Little attention, however, is devoted to how children's established morality is altered or affected when forced to commit atrocities. Wessells does remark that many children retain their "moral sensitivities" from before they were soldiers (73), but he then says that children are only beginning to think about "complex moral issues" (36). Agu's concerns prove otherwise; he is very much aware of the moral implications of his actions. The fact that Agu does not use his father's murder as justification speaks to his strong sense of right and wrong. And in order to minimize the psychological effect that taking another person's life will have on him, Agu subconsciously compares his first murder to his village's manhood ritual, which includes a young boy killing an ox. Both scenes involve the boy being encircled by older men who have gone through the same experience and an authority figure (the chief and Commandant) whispering instructions to them; the boys are both covered in blood, Agu with blood "just wetting

on my leg and my face” (21) and the manhood ritual boy rubbing blood all over his body; there is also “blood flying” (21, 56) everywhere. Agu’s association of his actions with the manhood ritual allow Agu to tell himself that he is not morally responsible for what he does. He then transforms the murder into a familiar action by giving structure and meaning to something over which he has no control.

The ritual demonstrates and celebrates the passage to manhood. The congregating villagers’ presence signifies the community’s approval of the ritual and the soldiers watching Agu kill are perverse doubles of that community; their presence shows that while Agu has been taught the difference between right and wrong, a new social order exists that deems Agu’s actions acceptable. Just as there is nothing wrong with killing an ox to become a man, there is nothing wrong with killing the enemy because Agu is “only doing what soldier is supposed to be doing” (23). Additionally, the ritualistic quality of the murder suggests that it is also a rite of initiation, as the real ritual brings a young boy into manhood. While the manhood ritual brings about a new state of being, however, Agu sees his first murder as one that will preserve his current state of being by keeping him alive.

Murder as a way of preserving one’s life is common almost to the point of being a universal for real child soldiers. Charles, a fifteen year-old former member of the LRA, recalls, “If you had a gun, you had to be firing all the time or you would be killed. And you were not allowed to take cover” (HRW 37). An anonymous former member of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) also remembers being made to kill people in front of his superiors (Singer 18). Like Charles and the

unnamed child, Agu knows he cannot abstain from killing, but any attempts to convince himself of his innocence are futile. He conceptualizes morality in Christian terms, which he learns from his mother reading Bible stories to him. She reads to him about “how Cain is killing his brother Abel, and how God is visiting Abraham, and about Jonah living in the fish. She was also reading about how God is making Job to suffer very much, but how He is rewarding him at the end, and how David is killing Goliath” (25). These stories teach Agu that God sees everything and that good behavior is rewarded while bad behavior is condemned. He internalizes these principles and applies them to himself, causing him to fear that God has seen his sins and they will not go unpunished. Agu later shows awareness of the possibility of forgiveness, but the majority of the Bible stories with which he is familiar prove God to be quick in his condemnation, implying that Agu’s preoccupation with his morality partially stems from his fear of approaching punishment.

Immediately after his first murder, Agu becomes obsessed with telling himself that he is not a “bad boy;” he sings a song repeatedly:

Soldier Soldier.

Kill. Kill. Kill.

That is how you live.

That is how you die.

The chant-like quality of Agu’s song serves as a therapeutic way for Agu to maintain his morality. If Agu is a bad boy, he cannot go to Heaven, which is what he wants. Also, Agu has already been separated from his biological father and violated by his

military father, so his relationship with his spiritual Father is extremely important. A flashback of Agu in church follows his song; he remembers singing “many song because God is liking music more than just talking so if we are singing, then He is listening well well. They are always telling us that God is liking children so much, that He is always watching us” (29). Agu’s soldier song, then, enables Agu to communicate his innocence to God. He does not speak directly to God through prayer, as his sense of moral depravity and shame prevent him from doing so, but Agu still wants to be heard. He tries to appease God by singing to Him, thus earning absolution. The solace Agu would gain from knowing that his God loves him (regardless of his crimes) would supply him with the peace of mind he needs to endure the war. Agu wants his efforts to maintain his morality and reject his actions acknowledged. Such encouragement helps him feel as if, despite his alienation from a society that shares his values, he belongs to something of a higher and more celestial scope. The prospect of Heaven has the potential to supply Agu with an inherent sense of belonging as well as the comfort of knowing he belongs to a God who is willing to ensure such a future for him.

The soldier song is one of the only instances in which Agu tries to speak to God, if only indirectly. God is rarely mentioned in the rest of the novel unless He is “forgetting everybody in this country” (48), an opinion quite different from Birahima, who claims that “[i]f you truly loved the Lord God and Jesus Christ, bullets wouldn’t hit you; they’d kill other people instead because it is God alone who kills the bad guys, the arseholes, the sinners and the damned” (70). Birahima, though, has been

indoctrinated not only with religious justification for murder, but with the idea that he brings deserved punishment to politically corrupt organizations. Agu's opinion of God stems from the cruelty to which he is constantly exposed, but the effects of war cause God's absence as much as indicate His absence. Agu implicates himself in the country's upheaval and barbarity since he causes some of the country's chaos, and sees himself as depraved as his surroundings.

Yet Agu's daydreams of his future still include a longing for forgiveness. They center on a well-paying job that will provide an overabundance of food, making Agu grow so fat "that I will not be able to see my feet even if I am stretching my neck all the way forward" (77); he follows this statement with his plans to return to church:

I will go back to church to ask God for forgiveness every day. And I will go back to church and sit on the bench under the fan that one day will just be falling and crushing me and I will not even be minding the splinter that is chooking into my leg because I will be paying attention to Jesus. I won't even be moving my eye from the statue of Jesus and instead I will just be sitting there watching Him and watching Him until one day He will be telling me that it is okay. (77)

Agu is starved for absolution; he needs it as much as he needs food. Overeating and his extreme route to absolution magnify his awareness of his sins and accurately convey Agu's disgust with himself and ache for spiritual fulfillment. He further envisions himself "sitting there" and waiting for absolution for an extended period of time, suggesting a feeling of helplessness on Agu's part. Despite his spiritual

deprivation, Agu cannot do anything to bring about forgiveness or demonstrate his contrition; everything depends on a God represented by an inattentive statue. God for Agu has gone from an entity that is “liking children so much” to one that has forgotten His children. Michael Wessells argues that a child soldier’s guilt is a “positive force” because it shows the child’s adherence to social norms (145), and Wessells is correct. But Wessells overlooks the effect of guilt on children’s self perception. Agu’s concept of God shows his sense of unworthiness to be in God’s presence or even prayerfully ask for forgiveness. Agu does say that he will “ask” for forgiveness, but his asking does not connote any action. It is as if Agu’s God does not want to hear from such a sinful child. Agu also sees himself as deserving of punishment, such as being crushed and pierced.

Collins, Gleason, and Sesma Jr., authors of “Internalization, Autonomy, and Relationships: Development during Adolescence,” believe that identity regulates behavior in children (qtd. in Grusec and Kuczynski 81). Regulation is only effective, though, if what children learn in their families corresponds to the value system of that child’s society. They go on to say that the identity children form in their homes helps them avoid conforming to “counternormative behavior” (81). Although this term refers to typical bad behavior among children, the authors’ insight applies to Agu. His parents have taught him to conduct himself with Christian values, and his sense of self rests on those values. But Agu’s identity development is not so advanced that he can resist accepting what his actions tell him he is. A child’s ideas about right and wrong shift with age (Damon 6). Agu’s sense of morality, then, can change in two ways: he

either breaks under the psychological burden of his guilt and adopts the morality of the rebels, or he remains in a morally stagnant position where the black and white concept of right and wrong he has learned from his parents never evolves into one that releases him from culpability. An adult would also have difficulty seeing himself as innocent, but such a task is almost entirely above Agu's mental capabilities.

We do not know how long Agu serves Commandant nor do we know how long Agu has been in the rehabilitation center before he tells us he has been there, so it is difficult to determine Agu's age at the end of the novel. What we do know, though, is that although Agu has experienced things no person should ever experience, his mental, emotional, and social growth have been stunted; the overwhelmingly horrifying commonalities of war would have a huge effect on anyone, but Agu's youth, along with his sensitivity, compound war's effects. Despite the fact that Agu does not want to be a part of the violence in which the rebels regularly participate, the need for belonging becomes too great and he starts to see the rebel group as an unhealthy but necessary "school or family" (106). The camaraderie he finds in the rebel group, perverse as it is, satisfies Agu's longing to belong.

Fortunately, Agu maintains the values of a normal society, but his experiences with the war and what he has come to accept as normal will need to be unlearned and his quest for a place in a group will be repeated in his efforts to reintegrate. Agu's participation in many brutal acts has changed him and he may not be able to reclaim his identity as a child, but it is possible for him to regain his place in society and

identify himself with a healthy community, allowing him the opportunity to heal from his trauma.

“I AM NOT BAD MAN”:

PERPETRATORS AS BOTH MONSTERS AND VICTIMS

Beasts of No Nation's very powerful first person perspective engenders a proximity to Agu's character that makes his victimization from both the outside world as well as the rebel group glaringly evident. Yet this point of view excludes other characters' victimization, with the notable exception of Strika. Agu's resistance to rebel mentality, his exploitation, and his degradation arouse quick sympathy for him, but the rebels' looting, raping, and killing inspire no pity. They are despicable characters for whom readers hold nothing but contempt. In addition to the damage Commandant and his men cause their immediate victims, their actions undoubtedly cause extreme future suffering for the villagers through famine, sexually transmitted diseases, exhausted environment, and fatherless children, thus transforming their country into a place of decay and death.

Despite their vile behavior, the rebels are not born monsters. Iweala reminds us in the writings that accompany the paperback version of his novel that he tried to draw the rebels with complexity to avoid their playing a type or simply being the bad guys of the novel. The rebels certainly represent men like Joseph Kony, but they are not static characters. Ishmael Beah also states that part of his intention for writing his memoir is to convey how all people are “equally capable of true evil” (*The Daily Show*). For Iweala's rebels, this equal capability means that the level of baseness they represent could be reached by anyone, making the rebels seem more human in their vulnerability. Viewing the rebels as humans rather than monsters reminds readers that

these soldiers could have begun as Agus. The future for child soldiers like Agu and Strika needs to be prevented. This chapter does not mean to excuse the soldiers' behavior, but only to show that they have also been exploited by the war and are, at times, victims of circumstance. Commandant's group provides the rebels with the feeling of control and purpose in their lawless and chaotic environment; this control motivates their actions and proves psychologically gratifying in a world with no positive reinforcement. The rebels appear devoid of compassion, but the sporadic moments where the extent of their victimization manifests itself prove them as still capable of human feeling.

The rebels generally justify their atrocities by declaring vengeance against enemies who have offended them. This motive suffices for Commandant and his men, but they also view themselves as political. Commandant offers his complex rationale when he tells a truck full of men in "enemy uniform" (17), "This territory is belonging to all of us rebel. You are trespassing" (16). If the rebels claim the area as theirs, then everything in that territory belongs to them; therefore, the rebels' rightfully possess any resources within those boundaries. Those outside of the rebels' borders are enemies who are "stealing our food, and killing my family" (51), and looting and raiding become acts of reclaiming what originally belonged to the rebels.

Of course the soldiers' logic is merely an excuse to exploit their countrymen. Their actions parallel those of Joseph Kony; while Kony has raped and pillaged countless communities, he has yet to capture any of the villages he and his men have destroyed (*Soldier Child*). *Johnny Mad Dog* and *Sozaboy* demonstrate similar

behavior. Once General Giap and his men occupy Kandahar and its surrounding area, Giap gives his men “*full authorization to take anything you want for a period of forty-eight hours. Whatever you wish is yours! Confiscate what you please! To the victors go the spoils—this is one of the benefits of war*” (6). They believe that overthrowing a government entitles them to other people’s possessions, making war “a real blast” (167). The government soldiers in *Sozaboy* are not as severe, but they do expect the people in Dukana to “give money, chop [food] and cloth” (6) to the soldiers being housed in their town.

The rebels in *Beasts* loot different goods from those in *Johnny Mad Dog*, however; Mad Dog and his comrades steal money, cars, and jewelry, but Commandant and his men take food, water, and clothing. Their thievery obviously results from the unavailability of more valuable products than from the rebels’ consideration for others. The war and the country’s current unstable economy make money and resources scarce, so luxury is nonexistent, especially in rural areas. It is also in these rural areas that people’s basic needs are not being met, a problem in Agu’s family; such poverty forces people to find their own means of survival.

Agu and Strika’s forced recruitment places them in a position to kill or be killed, but the other soldiers must also kill because of their lack of economic opportunities. Commandant’s group partially meets their most basic needs, a situation in which many children find themselves (Singer 62). The lack of essential needs is what Ervin Staub calls “the most fundamental motive” (52) for extreme or abnormal behavior. One Afghan child who fought against the Taliban says, “At the end of the

war we wanted peace but there were no jobs and we did not have any means of supporting our families. In such a situation, why not remain a soldier? At least it's a way of earning some small amount of money" (Wessells 155). Another child from Colombia recalled that life with a paramilitary organization "seemed like an easier life" (54) because it provided more income than did civilian life. *Beasts'* rebels are the same, only they need food instead of money, and finding that food means depriving others of it.

While there is no indication that the rebels do in fact voluntarily join the group, several references to the soldiers' civilian lives suggest a lack of choice comparable to Agu's and Strika's. Before Luftenant was a soldier, "his mother and father are dying in car crash when he is young and that is how he is ending up selling shoe in the market"; Agu thinks that he was "being born to sell shoe" (38-39). Agu's belief in Luftenant's birth into shoe selling implies that social mobility is restricted, which means that if Luftenant is born into poverty, he cannot change his situation and must accept his plight. Luftenant's orphanhood further heightens the lack of economic opportunities. The phrase "ending up" lends a desperate quality to his occupation, and evidences Luftenant's struggle to meet his needs. Even if he is not born to sell shoes, Luftenant cannot make a living any other way.

Commandant's hometown, ironically named the Town of Abundant Resources further exemplifies the country's economic depravity. During the rebels' travels, Commandant takes his men to the Town and describes it as having "so many foods to be eating like chicken, and cow, and goat, and vegetable, and fruit" (95), but neither

Commandant nor his men are surprised when they find “refuses, dead animal, and people everywhere” (100). If Commandant thought that his town was going to be in the same condition he describes, he would have been appalled at its decrepitude. His lack of response hints at a similarity between the town’s circumstances when Commandant first left and its current situation. Also, the soldiers share Commandant’s apathy, evidence of their desensitization to death as well as their being accustomed to food shortages. Many children in similar environments believe that both governmental militaries and rebel groups, because of the power their guns wield, can provide food and a steady income. One Congolese boy remembers that he simply “heard that the rebels at least were eating. So, I joined them” (qtd. in Singer 63). However, Commandant’s group does not meet the rebels’ needs with any more adequacy or regularity than civilian life. They are eventually reduced to eating leaves, and Agu is even “eating my skin” (118).

Although Commandant’s group may not feed its men, it offers them something the civilian world does not. The group provides a place for powerless people in a chaotic world. Their guns enable the soldier at least to go in search of food rather than passively starve to death or live in poverty. A child from Afghanistan “figured it was better to fight and try to get something, than hang around town doing nothing” (qtd. in Wessells 168). The rebels do not have a choice in their starvation as civilians, but their gun makes them feel more in control of their destiny. Because of this power, violence holds greater appeal than dying helplessly. For them, looting is active

prevention against becoming victims of their circumstances. Soldiers like Luftenant want to survive and the rebel group is one way to do so.

The country's tyrannical government also presents an obstacle to survival. Agu mentions early in the novel that the Southern part of the country, where he is, has more resources than the North, where the government is. He wonders whether this wealth is the reason government forces "are angrying at us and wanting to kill us" (41). The "us" could be the rebels themselves, but the government is as much a perpetrator as they are. In other words, the ambiguity of who "us" refers to allows for the possibility that "us" is everyone in the Southern part of the country and that the government oppresses its own people. Griot, a soldier who tells stories every night before the rebels go to sleep, recalls the government attack that killed his mother:

I was just in the market when I am hearing GBWEM! I am just hearing one blast and the whole ground began to shaking shaking. And then those government pilot, they are just coming in with their screaming plane...the drum were just beating BOTU BOTU BOTU because the pilot was shooting TAKA TAKA TAKA...And then I was feeling fire on my body but I wasn't burning. When I am looking up, I am seeing dead people hanging from tree like piece of meat. Head just hanging like coconut before it is falling off. Ah ah. Nah wah oh!...my mother. My mother. Heyeye now. My mother is dead. (79)

The government preys on innocent people just as the rebel group does. The war is not only in isolated areas and Commandant's men are not solely responsible for it. Agu

realizes the national situation when he looks at a map “of my country so everywhere is name of place I am hearing sometimes there is fighting or place where I am hearing there is enemy one day and no enemy the next day, but I am not knowing that everywhere there is war” (104). With his recognition of the amount of conflict in the country, Agu acknowledges the instability its people must be feeling by constantly being preyed upon, worrying and never knowing when to stop worrying because the state of their village or town changes daily. The people are sitting ducks who, if they do not die at the hands of the government, die at those of the rebels.

Wessells observes that “with no rule of law, armed groups—including government forces and opposition groups—openly attack and plunder villages, eliminating all vestiges of security and protection” (43). The situation Wessells describes nearly perfectly explains what happens to Griot’s village; the people meant to protect Griot and others are the ones destroying them. The opposition group provides a sense of safety. Griot does not have to sit helplessly by while both the government and rebels take shots at him; he can join a side and survive. During the civil war in Liberia, children in the Monrovia area were raped, beaten, and robbed by government soldiers, and joined LURD (The Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy), an opposition group, to protect themselves (Tate 11). Griot’s membership in Commandant’s group is probably for protection (43).

Griot and Luftenant do not feel as if they belong to the country because the country’s government attacks them; they do not belong to their family because their families are being killed; they do not belong to their villages because their villages are

being destroyed. While Commandant's group does not offer stability in the sense that its members are guaranteed survival, it has a father figure and facilitates fraternal relationships. The rebel group allows these soldiers to have, if only for a moment, what they have lost, especially when they are back at camp. Agu states:

Every night they are making fire and soldier is sitting down and talking...It is warm and making me to feel a little bit okay and I am happying to be back at the camp because it is nice here—at least nicer than having to be in place with all of its screaming people that you are killing all the time. And here, I am relaxing because there is no enemy that I have to be watching out for. (75-76)

Camp is also where “each person is finding his own best friend and they are going off to this corner or that corner” (106). Agu does not feel entirely safe, but camp offers respite from war. Agu describes being separated from the killing in which he participates, but separation from areas where killing takes place also extends to the government's attack on Griot's village. The rebel group, however sinister, provides Luftenant with the purpose and direction his family would have. His orphanhood leaves Luftenant lacking in skill, guidance, and a place in the world; he has found community with the rebel group, and that is comforting. And although the rebels are also killed, the group itself remains, and as long as the individual rebels live, they have a sense of belonging.

Not all of the rebels' actions are necessity-based. Their mistreatment of villagers serves only to fuel their egos. Nearly all of the interaction Commandant and

his men have with women is through rape. They view sexual violence as a way to assert their masculinity, and their need to prove that “he is man” (48) stems from Commandant’s relentless control over the rebels. In the beginning of the novel, Commandant establishes himself as someone who must be obeyed when he humiliates Luftenant after Luftenant fails to meet his superior’s expectations. Commandant’s domination over the other rebels undermines their unquestioned authority and power as males, a cultural value evident in Agu’s family. The soldiers can assume the role of the dominant figure, stretching concepts of masculinity to the extreme (Green 70) by raping. They establish their authority by enforcing women’s submission to the point of completely degrading the victims, thus emphasizing their powerlessness.

Contrastingly, the rebels’ relationships with the prostitutes at the brothel in the Town of Abundant Resources do not exist to reassert male authority. If anything, Commandant and his men assume submissive roles, by their own standards, when they accept the rules established by the Madame of the brothel; yet their acceptance of the Madame’s rules reinforces the rebels’ capacity to maintain nonviolent relationships. The brothel is one of the last remnants of normalcy in the novel, and its success as a business relies on maintaining and respecting the existing law. The Madame identifies the law when she says, “I am having plenty plenty womens in the back if you are having plenty plenty money to be giving me” (112). She also orders that the rebels not harass the woman who serves them bread and water.

The rebels do not have to obey the Madame’s rules since, as Mad Dog says, “Who can resist you? We’d been told that power lies at the muzzle of a gun, and it was

true" (24). Yet they pay for sex and stop harassing the waitress; they can control themselves. They obey the Madame because doing so showcases their ability to act outside of their soldier identity, thereby communicating their self-discipline and willingness to abandon their barbaric behavior. We do not know who specifically visits the brothel besides Commandant, Luftenant, and Agu, but even they do not like acting like soldiers all of the time. Commandant says that he is "not bad man" (88) after he rapes Agu; Luftenant has a "wish not to be fighting anymore" (116). They do not want to be seen as monsters. We can imagine how the other soldiers feel if their leaders express dissatisfaction with the kind of people they have become. The fact that the rebels make a conscious decision to frequent the brothel shows an unconscious desire to maintain their humanity and prove themselves capable of having casual relationships. Their behavior keeps them connected to the world outside of the war, which is paradoxical considering they join the war to escape that oppressive world.

Yet not all of the soldiers' behavior indicates their humanity. Luftenant may want to stop fighting, but he cannot behave civilly in a non-combative setting and gets into a fight with his prostitute. Luftenant's prostitute comes out of the room after having stabbed Luftenant; she is bleeding from her head and mouth, holding her throat, and crying. When asked what happened, the woman tells how "[Luftenant] is just grabbing my neck and beating me, so what am I supposed to be doing? I am only small girl. How can I be stopping him from doing anything? So I am just seeing this knife that he is having in his trouser and I am using it and just chooking [piercing] him to get him off of me" (114). This violent altercation illustrates brutality as an inherent

part of all sex for Luftenant. He abuses the prostitute because war has taught him that rape and abuse are acceptable ways to interact with women.

Ervin Staub, in his discussion on universal basic human needs, says that people “have a strong tendency to respond to signals of potential harm. Sights, sounds, people, or places that have been associated with harm create fear, stress, avoidance, or attack. Attack and threat of attack, which frustrate the need for security, are the strongest, most reliable instigators of aggression” (56). Because rape is such a fundamental part of Luftenant’s war experience, his unprovoked attack may have been the result of the recollection of a combat situation. In other words, if Luftenant has only interacted with women through rape and this rape occurs in battle, then any interaction with a woman automatically makes him recall instances of combat. Luftenant hates fighting; Agu mentions him “becoming Luftenant because he is thinking that officer is not having to fight...[and] in battle he is never coming to the front...Always, he is hiding behind the truck of anything” (39). His abuse could be seen as a type of involuntary reaction towards an extremely stressful situation.

Mad Dog’s feelings are comparable to Luftenant’s. When he rapes Tanya Toyo, a TV news anchor, he believes that she enjoys it. Then, when he has sex with his girlfriend Lovelita, Lovelita “sank her teeth into my forearm. I cried out, too, but from pain. The bitch! She’d probably bitten off some of my flesh in her cannibalistic orgasm” (169). He falls asleep and wakes up, noticing Lovelita’s jeans around her ankle. “Oh yeah, I remembered—we’d been screwing. I hadn’t raped her. You don’t rape a woman you love, especially not in the grass” (169). Mad Dog blurs the line

between normal sex and sexual violence so much that the reader wonders if he rapes Lovelita or not. And even if he does not rape Lovelita, Mad Dog is still violent with her, a treatment of women that carries over from his combat experiences.

It is easy to overlook the significance of *Beasts'* rebels' visit to the brothel since they treat the women so disrespectfully and use them only to "feel so good with their kissing and loving" (96), but the rebels do not have to visit a brothel. Another option for them would be to use sex slaves. Many rebels groups bring along girl soldiers to use strictly for sex or to be "wives" to leaders (Wessells 86). China Keitetsi, in her autobiography, further states that it was the duty of all female soldiers to gratify their male superiors sexually (155). Papa Le Bon and the higher ranking soldiers in *Allah* also keep women at their camp specifically for sexual pleasure. The prevalence of rape during combat means that such violence in warfare is appropriate, and *Beasts'* rebels' avoidance of it points to their humanity. The rebels are not much different from Luftenant; even Agu is "starting to abuse" (109) the woman who calls him a child. Luftenant is more dehumanized than the rest of them and no longer acts according to normal standards. The other soldiers, however, can still be saved. They have not become total victims of war and can, if given the chance, behave normally, thus indicating a fair amount of hope for their future.

Surprisingly, Commandant does not kill the prostitute who attacks Luftenant. His shock temporarily paralyzes him and he is "not even opening his mouth. He is just standing there and looking around us and then at Luftenant" (115). Agu also mentions how his "face is darkening and the whole room is smelling like fear and sweat" (114).

His physiological reaction and lack of retaliation suggest that Commandant has viewed the visit to the brothel as an opportunity to leave behind his soldier identity and interact with others in a civil manner. The brothel for Commandant is a place of pleasure, one to which he can go and have “four women in one day until my soldier is hurting too much for me to even be easing myself” (96). This environment cannot be maintained unless violence stays outside of its parameters. Any efforts to maintain boundaries between civilian and combat living are to no avail since an attack occurs anyway.

Commandant, according to his own standards, would be completely justified in killing the prostitute who attacks Lieutenant since she could be considered an enemy. In fact, Commandant does not even need a reason; his perceived authority gives him the right to do whatever he wants, but he respects the rules of the world and does not take justice into his own hands. An often difficult task for former child soldiers is leaving behind the power they gain through their guns (Wessells 184). China Keitetsi writes that when she first left the army, she had a hard time adjusting to being treated like a child and not a soldier. She was so accustomed to her gun earning her respect that she had difficulty taking orders from older civilians, and she returned to the army (146). Commandant’s ability to set his authority aside for this moment and not retaliate against the prostitute speaks to his desire to preserve a world of normalcy. But his darkened face evidences his realization that he does not have the power to prevent violence from spreading into areas in life meant to be separated from it; he

understands a little of how war destroys people by seeing Luftenant's attack and the prostitute's retaliation.

Commandant may exhibit remnants of his humanity at the brothel, but his identity does not extend beyond his role as a rebel leader. Unlike the rest of the soldiers, Commandant preys not only on civilians, but on his own men. Specifically, Commandant repeatedly rapes Agu and Strika. After he rapes Agu, Commandant says, "Do you want to know something? Let me tell you something...Agu. I am not bad man" (88-89). When Commandant says he is not a bad man, he means that he does not enjoy sodomizing little boys and that his lust is not for Agu; Commandant lusts for women but since there are no women in his camp, he uses boys to satisfy his urges. In essence, Commandant excuses himself of any culpability by blaming his actions on the necessity of satisfying his sexual desire. It is important to Commandant that Agu understand his leader's motivations so that he will not think evil of Commandant, yet what Commandant reveals about himself is that any action that Commandant deems necessary is necessary. The gentility with which Commandant seems to sodomize Agu further reinforces the idea of the rape as something against Commandant's will, but essential (Staub 336). However, Commandant actually does take pleasure in raping little boys because it emphasizes his control over other people. This control is what all of his action are predicated on. If the rape is excused, then so are any other actions, including the entire war he wages against his own people.

Commandant can admit his own degradation, but only to hide behind it. "I am not bad man" means that Commandant has not always been a killer and a rapist, but

not that he wants to stop being those things. Commandant does not want to change because the soldier identity works to his advantage so much that he does not see a reason to abandon it, even if it is to become more human. His acknowledgment of his degradation is merely an excuse to commit more crimes. While he laments the loss of relative peace in the brothel, Commandant does not want to change his way of life. Luftenant may have been unable to control his violent behavior, but his desire to stop fighting is very genuine. Expressing one's longing to stop fighting is extremely dangerous, but Luftenant's wish is so intense that he either explicitly discloses it to another soldier, who tells Agu, or he openly wishes not to be a part of the rebel group so much that Agu hears of it. Either way, Luftenant risks death in telling how he feels, a further indication of his desire to change his ways. Commandant has no such desire. He makes himself a despicable person because this personality enables him to get what he wants.

The most convincing evidence of the rebels' sense of humanity lies in their capacity for change. Rambo shows himself capable of change in his very active attempt to remove himself from the war. Ishmael Beah mentions that in addition to his memoir communicating how all people are capable of evil, he also intended to show that everyone is equally capable of change (*The Daily Show*). Iweala's Rambo is a perfect example of this capability. Rambo is third in command and second in command after Luftenant dies from the prostitute's stabbing. Various counselors at the School for War Affected Children in Northern Uganda (also known as the Laroo School) stress the brutality and mercilessness with which soldiers would have to

conduct themselves in order to gain rank ("A Silent War"). We do not see Rambo taking on such characteristics, but Commandant would not pick a leader he did not believe capable of carrying out his orders. Also, Rambo does not call himself Rambo for nothing. Agu describes him as "very tough and also mean, but he is also very smart. I am liking the way his eye is so sharp that they are seeing everything each time we are in battle. He is dodging bullet and bomb and all of the thing that are killing people. Sometime I am wondering if he is having his own juju to be making him live without fearing death" (43). Rambo is a skilled and experienced fighter.

Yet he is the very person to tell Commandant that "we are leaving" (122) and then shoot him. We do not get very close to Rambo, so we do not know his age or past, but with these three small words Rambo reclaims his life and acts out his determination in protecting himself against becoming like Commandant.

Paradoxically, Rambo's decision disrupts the sense of control that has motivated the entire rebel group. His refusal to fight causes him to be in a state of even more uncertainty than he was while serving under Commandant. But his limit of degradation has been reached and Rambo's refusal conveys his value of human lives. After Rambo shoots Commandant, he "is stopping his shaking and his puffing out his chest" (123). He has rid himself of the fear and tension he has experienced by being dominated and controlled by Commandant. His puffed chest shows that Rambo can finally be proud of a decision.

Also, Rambo does not simply shoot Commandant and then leave the rest of the group behind. He yells for the other soldiers to "COME ON! COME ON QUICK

QUICK QUICK! MOVE FAST OH! MOVE WITH SPEED! HOME HOME! WE ARE GOING HOME!" (123); Rambo's actions make it possible for everyone to have freedom, making him a savior. And his inclusion of the rest of the soldiers in his escape is not merely an afterthought. Throughout his conversation with Commandant, Rambo uses "we" instead of "I," conveying the forethought to help others. Moreover, Rambo says "we are leaving," but then says "I no want trouble" (122). This last statement suggests his awareness of his position as leader and his willingness to maintain that role. Rambo takes it upon himself to defend the soldiers before they are even free. And the other soldiers support Rambo as much as he supports them. When Commandant challenges Rambo's decision to leave, the other soldiers chime in: "I AM GOING...I AM GOING TOO, AND ME, AND ME, AND ME" (122-23). Their defense of Rambo against Commandant speaks to the camaraderie that has been developed in the camp and the soldiers' willingness to help one another in order to help themselves.

Rambo's actions are similar to Patrick, whose experiences as a high ranking officer in the LRA appear in a HDNET special entitled "A Silent War." After ten years in the bush serving Kony, Patrick, inspired one day by a verse in Isaiah, abandoned the LRA and led his entire unit out of the bush. Both Patrick and Iweala's Rambo manifest their humanity not only in their desire to change their own life, but in their willingness to risk their own lives by helping others. Beah's experiences in his memoir of running from the war contribute to understanding the extent to which Rambo endangers himself by aiding the other soldiers. Beah repeatedly says that it

was harder to escape from the war when he traveled with larger numbers of people. Rambo faces the same difficulty Beah did by allowing the other rebels to accompany him, yet he does not discourage them. Rambo does not try to comfort the former rebels during their long trek away from the war, nor does he try to provide for them, but he does maintain his role as leader. He demonstrates not only his consideration for his own men but his selflessness as well.

Of all the information and personal testimonies available on child soldiers, Patrick's story of an entire unit abandoning a rebel life is the only one that is known. Very rarely are entire units of soldiers set free because of their superior's actions, and almost never has there been an incident in which a soldier actually killed his leaders. Bullet, Mene's Sergeant Major, shoots their commanding officer in *Sozaboy*, but Bullet then returns to his unit. Iweala's creativity entitles him to deviate from the traditional experience of a child soldier's escape, but his doing so raises the question of whether or not he trivializes the child soldier's experience. The idea of a unit rebelling against its leader undermines the seemingly impossible feat of individual soldiers escaping from their group. Iweala's intention, however, is not to depict a child soldier's escape. Rambo functions as a symbol of the possibilities of a soldier's rehabilitation. Readers hope Agu can heal once he reaches the rehabilitation center because we come very close to him and come to know his values and his personality throughout the novel. Rambo, however, is not a sympathetic character and is not someone to whom we get very close. Iweala views Rambo in the same way Beah

views his book: as a means to communicate that everyone is equally capable of change.

Agu's innocence and unwillingness to participate in the rebels' crimes exempt him from condemnation. His age and the way in which he becomes a member of the group also reinforce his innocence. Other rebels, however, are not portrayed as innocently, especially since little background information is disclosed. But when readers consider Luftenant's, Griot's, and Rambo's motivations, internal struggles, and desire to put down their guns, they become more human. With the exception of Commandant, whose proof of humanity lasts only seconds, the rebels merit forgiveness and a second chance at life because they are victims as much as they are perpetrators.

When Ishmael Beah first arrived at a rehabilitation center, he hated everything about being there; he even, along with other residents, fought, vandalized, and terrorized the resident faculty members. It was only after he withdrew from the drugs he had been addicted to and examined what soldierhood had done to him that he began to feel remorse. Counselors constantly reminded him that "it was not your fault" (140) to help him separate his true identity from his actions. Child soldiers will not always appear as gentle and sensitive as Agu does, so remembering their humanity and innocence is paramount. By reserving our sympathy and pity solely for child soldiers similar to Agu, we deny the extent to which war damages children and turns them into monsters, thus alienating children from themselves. We also lose sight of the possibility for change in these child soldiers and risk creating countless numbers of

displaced children who have no one to help them. Soldiers like Rambo, Strika, Griot, and even Luftenant deserve the second chance at life that Agu receives.

FROM WAR TO REHAB: AGU'S PREPARATION FOR REINTEGRATION

Michael Wessells argues in *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* that the view of child soldiers as "scarred for life...is overplayed and out of touch with most former child soldiers' resilience and ability to function" (128). Although children are generally more vulnerable than adults, the assumption that war leaves them "emotional cripples" (136) and incapable of rehabilitation is incorrect. Iweala's Agu is no exception. Agu is clearly traumatized by his forced service with the militia, but the moments in which his vibrant personality comes through speak to his strong spirit and potential to reintegrate into normal life. Nevertheless, Agu's situation must not be trivialized, as he faces a hard road ahead of him at the end of *Beasts of No Nation*. Since Agu does not have the option of returning to his family, the immense support he will need in overcoming various obstacles must come entirely from the rehabilitation center he inhabits at the close of the novel. Yet this center, like many others, cannot assist Agu in all the ways that he needs, causing him intense anxiety about his future.

According to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, child soldiers such as Agu are entitled to resources that facilitate and provide "the necessary protection and assistance so that [he] can fully assume [his] responsibilities within the community" (United Nations), and rehabilitation centers play an integral role in achieving this goal. However, "necessary protection and assistance" is often interpreted as meeting only the immediate needs of children, and, while these needs are certainly important, more future oriented programs are neglected. Agu in particular would benefit from receiving assistance for the future, as he is more psychologically prepared than typical child

soldiers. While many former soldiers look forward to a life of normalcy, their outlook on life often remains tainted with despair (Wessells 38). Agu's daily walks on the beach and wonder at the trees and animals, though, exhibit his excitement for life. However, when he thinks about leaving the rehabilitation center Agu becomes apprehensive. While his resilience may help Agu adjust more easily to normal life, without more adequate attention to what Wessells calls the "greatest life stresses" (181), Agu's problems with community acceptance, identity reclamation, and overcoming his guilt become compounded, making successful integration extremely challenging.

The best case scenario for former child soldiers is their return to caring families and safe communities that facilitate the stability and familiarity that encourage positive reintegration. The probability of Agu returning to his own village after his stay in the rehabilitation center is slim, however, considering its evacuation and destruction by the rebels; nevertheless, Agu will need to reenter society on some level. In doing so, he faces the uncertainty of a community's acceptance of him, and his displacement from his parents as well as the lack of an outside support system makes reintegration even more difficult for both the community and Agu (Fraser 78).

As much as Agu longs for a normal life while he is with the rebels, he begins to fear communal rejection once he reaches the rehabilitation center; he communicates his anxiety by avoiding war-related discussions with Amy, the resident psychotherapist. When Amy asks Agu to tell her his thoughts, he sometimes refuses because "I am knowing too many terrible thing to be saying to [her]. I am seeing more

terrible thing than ten thousand men and I am doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men. So if I am saying these thing, then it will be making me to sadding too much and [her] to sadding too much in this life" (141). His avoidance is not an uncommon way for former child soldiers to cope with their trauma (Wessells 139), as it can prevent overpowering feelings of self-loathing or sorrow. Agu already sees himself as "some sort of beast or devil" (142) and does not want Amy to view him similarly. His dread of her opinion reflects Agu's worry of communal judgment. Although she is American and not part of Agu's community, Amy's foreignness represents the outside society with which Agu will eventually have to assimilate. Yet her position as psychotherapist necessitates that she not judge the children she works with, and her compassion for Agu's grief is evident through the tears that spring to her eyes after Agu reveals his fear of her rejection.

Amy's sensitivity and the safety offered by the rehabilitation center may not exist outside of the center's walls. Therefore, any anxiety that Agu has about communal rejection can only be magnified once he leaves the center. Moreover, after Father Festus, the visiting priest, tells Agu that confession, forgiveness, and resurrection are possible for him, Agu remarks that these words do "not [make] any sense to me" (139); he feels as if he has transgressed so much that he can never be forgiven. Agu's statement refers directly to God and his personal relationship with Him, but the statement's emphasis lies in the unforgivability of Agu's actions. He does not understand the words because he cannot comprehend the acts they describe. Linked to confession, forgiveness, and resurrection is the possibility of reentry into

and acceptance from a normal society. Agu's inability to understand these concepts suggests his disbelief in a community's ability to look beyond his soldierhood; if God cannot forgive Agu, then societal forgiveness is impossible.

Communal rejection causes great anxiety for nearly all ex-child soldiers (Wessells 133), and even Mad Dog, a boy soldier who prides himself on his brutality and military abilities, wants Laokole, his last potential victim, to see that "Johnny Mad Dog is no vicious beast" (316). One former child soldier of UNITA (the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) was so worried about his community's response to his return that he actually feared for his safety. He says, "Some people don't like to see me at all because I was a UNITA soldier. They hate me because they say UNITA came here and killed the people and robbed their possessions... That makes me fear that something might happen to me" (qtd. in Honwana 143). Michael Wessells and Davidson Jonah write in "Recruitment and Reintegration of Former Youth Soldiers in Sierra Leone" that communities' receptions of ex-child soldiers are mixed, but some do regard returning children as "'rebels' and 'troublemakers,'" which can thwart societies' willingness to welcome these children back into their midsts (38), so Agu's concerns are real.

The rehabilitation center does provide a haven for Agu, but its heavy reliance on Western approaches to therapy (the victim's expressing his feelings and relating his traumatic experiences) does not prepare children adequately for reentering society (Sesay 185), thus limiting his recovery (168). Agu's daily one-on-one therapy sessions take place with Amy "sitting in her chair and [Agu] sitting in [his] own chair" (140), a

doctor-patient setting familiar to Western readers. Although Amy is doing what she knows best and what she believes will be helpful, her method excludes the possibility of expression of feelings as culturally abnormal (Sesay 180). In other words, Agu could be uncomfortable talking about his rebel life because his cultural environment encourages stoicism rather than verbalization of one's neuroses. Whether this assumption is true or not, Amy may eventually interpret Agu's reticence as evasion rather than an acceptable coping strategy. Not all inexpression is repression, however. In many instances, those suffering from trauma have been found to prefer moving on with their lives and not talking about past events (Honwana 5). Lynn Jones, in *Then They Started Shooting*, observes that all children process trauma and heal differently. She uses five related children who survived a massacre in Kosovo in varying ways to demonstrate her point. The children's coping mechanisms included avoidance of discussion, freely relating their experiences, and wanting to tell the story once (250).

These examples do not suggest that Agu's reluctance to relate his war memories is entirely healthy, but rather propose the possibility of avoidance as an effective coping technique. Amy's narrow approach stifles such variety; it is too confrontational for Agu, and his reluctance to discuss his war memories indicates his discomfort with Amy. Agu does not feel as if he benefits from his sessions and thinks, "[Amy] is always looking at me like looking at me is going to be helping me. She is telling me to speak speak speak and thinking that my not speaking is because I am like baby. If she is thinking I am baby then I am not speaking because baby is not knowing how to speak" (140). Speaking directly about his trauma forces Agu to remember

things about himself that he would rather forget and continually reminds him that he is different from other children. The psychotherapy further reinforces his sense of victimization, which affects his recovery by causing him to act more passively and more hopelessly (Wessells 134); Agu's response to Amy's silent observation of him shows his acceptance of Amy's alleged perception of him as inarticulate, helpless, and juvenile. A less confrontational approach may more effectively encourage him to express himself. Birahima of *Allah* would also rather avoid particularly sensitive subjects, despite his candidness. When his friend Sekou becomes a child soldier, he earns the nickname "Sekou the Terrible"; Birahima remembers how Sekou earns his name, but states, "I don't feel like telling it and I'm not obliged to, and anyway it makes me sad, really sad" (113). After someone is tortured, Birahima later says, "I don't have to tell everything in my bullshit story" (183). His sensitivity towards the subject makes him uncomfortable to talk about what he would rather not remember.

African culture, according to Alcinda Honwana, is largely community-based. Former child soldiers, then, cannot simply be treated as individuals outside of their cultural context (153), which is what psychotherapy does. Of all the details Agu provides about the rehabilitation center, he only mentions other child residents by using "we" and in reference to showing off his outfits to others; he does not even seem to play by himself, let alone with others. These details show Agu distancing himself from the center community even though he could benefit from it. Counselors in Grafton Camp in Sierra Leone, for instance, have children write and perform their own rap songs, singing of sadness as well as joy (Wessells 191). Other centers encourage

children to sing songs from their childhood, reconnecting them to communities as well as to one another (191). Agu's enjoyment of song makes these forms of healing more familiar, so healing and acceptance are reached quicker and children will not feel alienated from their communities. Such group activities would ultimately help Agu's transition from rehabilitation center to society go more smoothly.

Although Agu is willing to mention every aspect of the rehabilitation center (food, clothing, privacy, etc.), readers cannot assume that his omission of other forms of healing points to the rehabilitation center's inadequacies. However, Iweala has chosen to leave Agu where he is: dissatisfied with psychotherapy. Iweala's research on child soldiers for *Beasts* would have familiarized him with successful as well as insufficient forms of therapy. Agu's discomfort with and dislike of psychotherapy shows Iweala's awareness of more community-oriented forms of healing as important. Moreover, Agu's therapy sessions with Amy and the effect they have on him spark further complications in Agu's healing, some of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The rehabilitation center's sense of community contributes not only to a more fluid transition to outside environments, but also to the children's reclaiming their identities. Agu's life with the militia operates on brutality and survival, but Agu can still recover and enjoy remnants of his childhood, most importantly, learning to laugh and play in an uninhibited way. He has been deprived of simple happiness for so long that he needs to relearn how to be happy. Agu's mental health also depends on his ability to find joy in life, but he must actually want to recapture that joy. Agu laments

being unable to play like a normal child when he realizes that “I am not remembering the last time I am playing games” (122), and throughout his soldierdood desires a normal child’s life.

Although Agu shows enthusiasm for his life ahead of him, he is skeptical about finding happiness outside of the rehabilitation center. He tells Amy:

I am wanting to stay in this place forever, never moving for anything, just waiting waiting until dust is piling on me and grasses is covering me and insect is making their home in the space between my teeth...I am wanting to be happy in this life because of everything I am seeing, I am just wanting to be happy. (141)

At this point in Agu’s recovery, happiness equates to regular meals and safety, and understandably so, but the happiness he conceives of keeps him paralyzed in time, and prevents him from being exposed to other mediums of joy. In other words, remaining in the rehabilitation center would mean a permanent separation between community and individual. Because his identity must center on his relationship with society, Agu would never be able to reclaim fully his identity, thereby stunting his recovery. The center meets Agu’s basic needs, but his remaining there would cause him to be stuck in a perpetual state of displacement and uncertainty of future. The death imagery (i.e., the grass piling, the dirt covering, and the insects inhabiting Agu’s face) shows the extent to which he does not want to leave the rehabilitation center; it is stable and he doesn’t want to risk losing that stability. Moreover, Agu’s words connote a sense of his feeling as if he has wasted away and that life has passed him by, a state he

embraces. Agu is, in effect, terrified of leaving the center, which needs no explanation considering the horrific experiences of the war.

Despite the fact that the war has stunted Agu's emotional development, the rehabilitation center has the potential to rekindle in Agu a desire to enjoy life by scheduling activities that encourage socialization such as dancing and playing sports or other games. These activities remind Agu that he is still a child and is entitled to reclaim what has been denied him. Agu recaptures a child's wonder of the world in his awe and excitement of the center's environment, but he does not exhibit similar enthusiasm about the other residents, most likely because he has learned from the militia that he cannot trust others. He has also lost a lot of confidence in himself, which is why Agu continues to view himself as a beast. Dancing and game playing would allow him to laugh and joke with other children similar to him, thus building healthy relationships. In *Soldier Child*, a 1998 documentary on child soldiers from the LRA now staying in the GUSCO Rehabilitation Center in Northern Uganda, the only time children were smiling and free from the burdens of war-related trauma occurred when they were playing. If Agu had friendships with others, then he could gain the confidence to face the world and seek out his own happiness.

Agu's therapy sessions cause him to want to stay in the center; they remind him that he is different from other children. It is only after he thinks about the war that he grows nervous about his future. In fact, Agu exhibits considerable ambition considering his circumstances. Both before and during his time with the militia Agu

looks forward to getting an education that will allow him to have a lucrative career, as seen in the following lines:

I am thinking I am wanting to be Engineer because I like how mechanic is always doing thing to the truck and I like to be watching even though there is no chance for me to try what they are doing. And sometimes I am thinking that I want to be Doctor because I will be able to be helping people instead of killing them...these people are the one who are the big men. (76)

Agu maintains such aspirations at the center. When Amy asks what he is thinking, he responds: “[E]very day I am telling her the same thing, I am thinking about my future. What is your future, she is asking to me. And I am saying I am seeing myself becoming Doctor or Engineer and making too much money so I am becoming big man and never having to fight war ever again” (141). Agu thinks about his future every day, but the war only “sometimes.” Garbarino and Kostelny claim that a loss of future orientation is common among children in war zones, “particularly those who have first-hand experience with severe personal loss” (39), but such is not the case with Agu; even Mad Dog collects books when he raids in hopes of becoming a “true intellectual” after the war (264). Planning for the future usually signifies ex-child soldiers’ inclination to move on and rejoin society. Furthermore, this drive can motivate Agu to take his place in society and make a life for himself, a task very difficult for children as displaced as he is. Wessells asserts that “former child soldiers frequently regard as their biggest problem not the impact of past violence but the

formidable stresses of the postwar living situation” (128). One boy from Uganda says, “I would like to go home and continue a normal education, but there is nobody to support me. There is nobody to care for me. I pray to God to help” (HRW 49).

Agu’s situation is similar to the young Ugandan’s but Agu is positive about his possibilities, giving him a mental advantage. He expresses his ambition through his drawings “of school so I can be finishing and becoming Doctor and Engineer” (139). This healthy form of expression provides Agu an outlet for his ambitions, but Agu is ready for action. What he needs to accompany that ambition is hope that he can actually achieve this goal. The school drawing and any hopes of going to school are restricted to a fictive context; it remains in a fictive context because he is ready for action. He communicates his enthusiasm but he cannot apply it to anything constructive or instructive. While the school represents his ambitions, Agu does not envision himself realizing his dream since he never wants to leave the center. The dream remains solidified in an imaginary world and is only a symbol rather than a possible reality. The rehabilitation center stifles Agu’s enthusiasm by not providing activities that bring him closer to his dream.

The school drawing does indicate, however, that Agu possesses a drive for future success that needs to be encouraged and developed. Don Bosco Homes in Sierra Leone (Sesay 148), the GUSCO Rehabilitation Center (*Soldier Child*) in Uganda, and School for War Affected Children (“A Silent War”) are fortunate examples of centers able to provide training in carpentry, upholstery, tailoring, and construction work, which help children rebuild their self-confidence and respectability (Sesay 189). This

type of self-esteem building is the kind of action Agu needs. Vocational training makes the transition from child to adult easier for former child soldiers; a man who earns a living is able to marry and be a father and husband (Wessells 203), thereby solidifying his place in a community. Agu, then, cannot adequately adjust to a society that holds no place for him. No training keeps him in a state of perpetual hopelessness and may cause him to believe that no options exist for him outside of the center. Agu's advantage is his ambition; he has a glimmer of hope for a better life, and it is this hope that will get him through the difficult tasks ahead of him. Amy and other resident faculty members need to do everything in their power to nurture this feeling in Agu so that he may be able to regain his previous ambition and a confidence that may sustain him longer than his stay at the center.

The most personal aspect of Agu's recovery is his learning to accept himself. Almost all of the psychological obstacles Agu faces center around his sense of guilt. Guilt among child soldiers manifests itself in various ways, including avoidance of discussion, self-deprecation, flashbacks, and nightmares (Wessells 129) or visits from dead victims (Sesay 187), nearly all of which are associated with high levels of trauma (Wessells 129). Agu experiences his most intense guilt while he is with the rebels. He usually vocalizes his guilt, but as he is forced to commit more and more atrocities, his feelings find outlet in his flashbacks. Although the majority of Agu's flashbacks are recollections of his life before the militia, he becomes more disturbed as his time with Commandant increases, and his last flashback takes on a more sinister and

supernatural tone. He remembers his teacher, Mistress Gloria, writing a lesson on the board:

She is writing, I will not kill, I will not kill. I will not kill, and everybody is writing in their book...excepting me because I am not having book. Then the teacher is turning around and looking at me and I am fearing because she is having the face of that woman I am killing with blood everywhere on her face and in her eye...she is walking to me with one sharp machete that is shining like river is shining. When she is coming near to me, all of the face of the child are only the girl that they are using anyhow, that Strika is killing. I am starting to want to scream. (105)

Agu's speech is usually very clear, but in this case, the syntax of "they are using anyhow," although a reference to the treatment of a female victim, is quite garbled, indicating the stress of having to recall such violence and process his participation in similar acts. The violent tone of this scene suggests that Agu's recollection is more a waking nightmare than a flashback, especially since the actual event is imaginary; its familiar setting further implies that the nightmare will continue to occur and will leak into his new life. Yet Agu does not mention anything of the sort at the rehabilitation center; its peaceful atmosphere alleviates much anxiety and guilt.

In fact, the only mention of any war memories is his memory of Strika:

The only thing that is making any sense to me is memory that I am having of another boy—Strika—sleeping next to me, so close because

we are the only people protecting each other from all of the thing trying to kill us. I am remembering sound of people coughing and screaming, and the smell of going to toilet and dead body everywhere. This is the only thing that I am knowing. (139-40)

Only when he is confronted by faculty members does Agu react negatively. Agu thinks of Strika when Father Festus speaks to him of forgiveness. I have already indicated that Agu's religious conversation relates to society's acceptance of him, but it also relates to Agu's inability to forgive himself. Strika is emblematic of this absence because he is an innocent victim just like everyone else and reminds Agu of how he took the lives and innocence of others. Neither religion nor therapy helps Agu, so he may need to cleanse himself of guilt in a more traditional way. Several places throughout Africa, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, and Angola believe that spirits return to inflict pain on those who offended them in life (Honwana 104-34). The supernatural quality of his waking terror suggests Agu's belief in the returning of spirits. Sierra Leone and Liberia, West African countries, hold similar beliefs in spirits returning and causing great pain for the people with whom they are angry; Agu feels such pain.

It would not be out of context to judge Agu's nightmare as influenced by spirits, as his belief in spirits is evident in his village's balance between Christianity and traditional concepts of spirituality during the manhood ritual. His acquaintance with the power of the spirit world is also evident when Strika discovers Agu hiding in the beginning of the novel. Agu imagines himself already dead and that "maybe this

boy is spirit and I should be thanking him for bringing me to the land of spirits" (3). Strika's dragging and beating Agu shows that spirits are not without substance and manifest themselves in very real ways in everyday life. In fact, spirits not only have access to the physical, living world; they "share a combined existence and interact in everyday life," as stated by Honwana, and are powerful enough to cause good or ill fortune (106-07), including war (Sesay 168). Agu identifies the relationship between warfare and the spirit world after he has not seen signs of human life for a long time. He realizes that he is "only seeing war, one evil spirit sitting in the bush just having too much happiness because all the time he is eating what he wants to eat—us—and seeing what he is wanting to see—killing—so he is just laughing GBWEM! GBWEM! GBWEM!" (118). Agu's belief in spirits differs from that of Birahima, who emphasizes the supernatural as a form of protection and as well as a preventative against his opponents while Agu sees spirits as perpetrators of violence. Agu does not explicitly name this spirit as responsible for the war, but he does imply, in the power the spirit gains, that the spirit connects to those doing the killing. If the spirit takes pleasure in the destruction of men, then Agu's nightmare is the result of a spirit since the haunting image of war destroys him. More specifically, it is the spirit of the woman Agu has killed.

Spirits who torment their killers do so until they are appeased; if they are not appeased, "their wrath will befall both the perpetrators and their communities" (Sesay 187). Agu's psychological recovery, then, relies on the spirit world since his guilt will continue to overwhelm him unless the angry spirit releases him. He later shows

his fear of spirits to be even greater than the war; he thinks about escaping, “but when I am getting up to go and run away, I am thinking about all the animal and the spirit in the bush” (134). A Western reading of *Beasts* would most likely attribute Agu’s fear to children’s common fear of the unseen, but when read within the culturally appropriate context, the novel clearly demonstrates that Agu is acknowledging the spirits’ fury against him.

Agu does not actually attribute his nightmare to the spirits, but this lack of recognition could be because of his already overwhelming guilt. Consequently, Agu could be psychologically unprepared to acknowledge the spirits’ revenge on him. When the rebels are camping, Agu comments that “everywhere is just black, but you are hearing voice just talking or singing like spirit in the night” (106). The voices belong to his fellow soldiers, so the mention of a spirit lends possession as a possibility, indicating a definite relationship to the spirit world and a soldier’s psychology. The fact that this comparison comes directly after his own nightmare demonstrates his inability to apply such a relationship to himself.

Agu’s waking nightmare is comparable to Susan’s, a former soldier of the LRA. She says, “When I go home I must do some traditional rites because I have killed. I must perform these rites and cleanse myself. I still dream about the boy from my village who I killed. I see him in my dreams and he is talking to me and saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying” (HRW 50). The traditional rites Susan refers to are ways in which children’s communities can cleanse returning children of angered spirits, and appease them as well, as they must be happy in order for the child

to reintegrate and heal successfully (Honwana 107). Amadu of Sierra Leone, for instance, had to enter a hut built specifically for the cleansing ritual. Once inside, Amadu had to remove the clothing he wore while with the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) and the clothing and hut were set on fire while he quickly got out. He then had to sacrifice a chicken to the spirits and smear blood around the ritual area to appease them (Sesay 187-88).

The way people manage their suffering remains, according to Honwana, “inextricably connected” to their understanding of that suffering (150). Therefore, Agu is more psychologically impacted because of his belief in spirits than he would be if he thought his nightmare was a manifestation of his trauma (Wessells 151). Traditional healing is also nonconfrontational, which is what Agu needs. Cleansing requires no rehashing of the past and allows Agu the possibility of leaving his guilt behind him completely. He is ready for such a new beginning and has a large amount of hope. We see this hope when Agu says he is “having mother once, and she is loving me” (142), articulating his desire for acceptance and a small hint of feeling deserving of such love. Eliminating his guilt will put him one step closer.

Despite the traumatic events Agu has survived, his resilience appears quite clearly. His enthusiasm for his new setting speaks not only to his state of mind, but to his potential for reintegration into a normal society. Agu’s overall attitude towards life suggests that child soldiers needs not be lost causes or become part of a so-called lost generation. Ishmael Beah is living proof that rehabilitation is possible. The center he inhabits is largely responsible for Agu’s recovery of his personality since it facilitates

a safe environment and meets Agu's basic needs as well as provides him with the books he loves. Without its support Agu would not be as lively as he is in the final chapter of *Beasts*.

Although the rehabilitation center's immediate assistance is vital, Agu also needs help preparing for his future. What lies ahead of him causes Agu anxiety, and he will need the support in reestablishing himself within a community, forgiving himself, and reclaiming his identity. The rehabilitation center does its best to try meeting Agu's long term needs, but its reliance on psychotherapy risks limiting Agu's healing and keeping him disconnected from a community. It is not a foregone conclusion, however, that the center's inadequacies will result in a permanent alienation from Agu's self as well as others. Agu's enthusiasm for his surroundings as well as his excitement for his future career demonstrate the power of this part of the novel. Iweala skillfully demonstrates the human capacity to recapture joy in life, to survive despite the odds, and to discover wells of inner strength without which Agu's recovery would be impossible.

CONCLUSION

The first time I heard of child soldiers was almost two years ago when I was watching a *Dateline* special on Joseph Kony and his abduction of children in Northern Uganda. I recall being overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness and rage that I was hearing about child soldiers for the first time. I wandered in this state for some time before coming across Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog*, and, after finishing it, I vowed to do my thesis on similar books, eventually deciding on *Beasts of No Nation*. Belinda Luscombe warns against the recurring publicity of child soldiers in popular culture in "Pop Culture Find Lost Boys," and predicts that the effect could be trivializing and sensationalizing a very serious concern (64). She cites *Blood Diamond*, *Casino Royale*, and a cartoon in *The Onion* to prove her point. It is tempting to categorize *Beasts* as part of popular culture, particularly since *The New York Times* named it one of the 100 Notable Books of 2006 ("100 Notable"), and it is receiving publicity in *People* and *USA Today*. Yet *Beasts* and similar novels are not purely for entertainment, or what Luscombe calls functioning as "clip art for a hit of emotion and danger" (63).

Literary representations of child soldiers move beyond evoking sympathy and give voice to victims unable to speak for themselves. The story of the child soldier has barely begun to be told. Human Rights Watch testimonies continue to be collected and published, but very rarely do people read these. My thesis focuses almost exclusively on African male child soldiers only because African males are currently the only protagonists in fictional narratives. In reality, however, both male and female child

soldiers exist in Africa, Central and South America, East Asia, and the Middle East, and while these children's experiences are certainly comparable, Agu's, Johnny's, Mene's, and Birahima's stories do not come close to encompassing the entire experience. The future of child soldier narratives lies in attempting to capture these children's stories as much as it is possible to do so.

Although children have been victimized on such a large scale for at least twenty years, the only autobiographical accounts published are Keitetsi's and Beah's. What made these accounts possible was the authors' emigrations from their native countries. This is not to say that Beah and Keitetsi would have been unable to write their memoirs while in their respective countries, but rather that their departure removed them from any immediate danger and placed them in situations that made the resources necessary to tell their story readily available. Such availability is often difficult in war-torn countries. While Beah and Keitetsi are extremely fortunate to find new life after such horrifying experiences, many children remain displaced after escape from soldierhood, if they escape at all. Their stories go mostly unheard, thus affecting the amount of assistance and protection traumatized children as well as children at risk receive. Fictional accounts become essential because they provide these children with a voice.

As fictional characters written by men who have never experienced the life of a child soldier themselves, there are bound to be flaws and shortcomings, but the fact that these narratives are reaching millions of readers spreads awareness, empowering readers to prevent actively the exploitation of children in combat. Iweala, in the

supplemental writing in the paperback version of the novel, writes that *Beasts* “seeks to tell a more universal story of this horrible phenomenon [of child soldiers] that has appeared in our world today.” He also identifies his novel as “an attempt to capture multiple lifetimes of suffering...[and] exists as a tribute to those who have suffered greatly as a result of direct abuse and international neglect.” While Iweala’s literary accomplishments speak for themselves and allow the novel to stand on its own, Iweala’s heavy reliance on true accounts of child soldierhood has allowed him to create a piece of work that actively serves to raise awareness. It is one of his goals and the fact that it is well written certainly helps.

Iweala’s imaginative rendering of a child soldier’s life also complements true accounts by attempting to provide real soldiers’ narratives a sense of entirety. Often times former child soldiers’ accounts are what children are comfortable with disclosing or, in order to protect themselves emotionally, relate only the skeletal remains of their experiences. Iweala’s reliance on actual events, such as the jumping up and down on dissenters and the cutting out of babies, helps readers understand more fully the extent to which war traumatizes children and the immense amount of aid these children need.

After having familiarized myself with many cases of child soldier use, I continue to feel helpless and angry, as these children do not receive adequate aid. Although legislative action has been taken in the form of *The Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the International Criminal Court’s arrest warrant for Joseph Kony, and the declaration of the use of children under fifteen in “hostilities” a war crime

(Wessells 237), the action stops at the page. Birahima refers to the efficacy of foreign aid tactics as “suggest[ing] a change to the changes that doesn’t change anything” (171), and he seems to be right. For reasons that range from willful inaction to bureaucratic red tape to the inherently slow process of the international court system (Wessells 238), neither the United Nations nor any individual country has been able to prevent the use of child soldiers or rid countries of tyrants responsible for either recruiting or abducting children for war. Furthermore, there are many people who do not participate in creating those laws yet want to take action. Their separation from law making can leave them frustrated in their inability to help.

The action these people can take seems trivial in comparison to the vast size of the child soldier epidemic, but once they view a problem as too large, they relegate the issue to an acceptable part of life and endorse it through their passivity. Michael Wessells offers the most comprehensive suggestions on “one of the monumental challenges of our time” (232). He says that many of the rebel groups’ finances for wars come from selling precious resources illegally (239). Knowing these resources, which include drugs, and boycotting them helps cut off their funding. Wessells further observes that it is “unrealistic” to assume that the U.N. Security Council could be thorough enough to identify and prevent every illegal trade, so it is up to consumers to be aware of what they are buying. Change never happens from the top down, and our power as consumers is part of effecting change. Additionally, more participation in global campaigns such as the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (www.child-

soldiers.org) will help organize people and communicate to governments worldwide that their constituents want them to effect change.

Literary representations of child soldiers are instrumental in empowering the global community. They also last longer and leave deeper impressions than legislation. Dongala's and Kourouma's novels were originally published in French, making them accessible not only to citizens of the Ivory Coast and the Democratic Republic of Congo, but all French speaking countries, particularly in Africa; they were later translated into English, creating international awareness. *Beasts* plays an integral role in raising such awareness because it depicts quite accurately the condition of child soldiers and the extent to which war affects their vulnerable identities. *Beasts* helps us remember that even the apathetic Mad Dog and Birahima are victims. Agu is the unifying element that puts all child soldiers in literature on equal footing; we have to continue to see child soldiers as victims in order for us to feel as if our efforts to protect them are worthwhile. While Mad Dog and Birahima are despicable characters, they and others like them need protection as much as more evident victims like Agu. Agu reminds us that child soldiers are human, and coming close to him fuels our desire to prevent and abolish the "monumental" tragedy of child soldiers.

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